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Foster LA Times youths in sex trade

L.A. County Board of Supervisors orders a multiagency task force to address the issue.

By ABBY SEWELL

A majority of juveniles arrested on prostitution charges in Los Angeles County come from the county's foster care system, and, in some cases, pimps use underage sex workers to recruit fellow group home residents, county officials said.

Until now, foster youth caught in the sex trade have largely been the responsibility of the county Probation Department.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to launch a multiagency task force to address the ongoing issue of sex trafficking involving youth in the foster care system. The move was spurred in part by this month's passage of an anti-sex-trafficking ballot measure, which county officials said will shift much of the responsibility for juvenile prostitutes from the criminal justice system to the foster care system.

Of the 174 juveniles arrested on prostitution-related charges in Los Angeles County in 2010, 59% were in the foster care system, according to Probation Department records.

[See Prostitution, AA2]

Trained DCFS team keeps children safe amid raids

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By Christina Villacorte
Staff Writer

It was midnight near the docks in Wilmington, and dozens of registered sex offenders roused from their sleep stood against a wall, their hands tied behind their backs, as armed parole agents searched their rooms.

A helicopter gunship whirred loudly while swarms of police cars blocked potential escape routes.

Looking frightened amid the commotion were a young woman and her children — innocents caught up in the September parole sweep called Operation Safe Haven.

The older boy, 5, sat on his mother's lap, looking bewildered, not speaking, and Xiomara Flores-Holguin of the county Department of Children and Family Services tried to make him feel at ease.

"You're beautiful," she told him, in a friendly manner. "You look like your mom."

The younger boy, 4, slept through the entire operation in the arms of a parole agent.

In years past, the family might have been left to fend for themselves.

Back then, law enforcement officers tended to focus solely on their criminal targets. Now, they ride out with specially trained social workers, who care for minors encountered in raids on illegal gangs, drug cartels, weapons dealers, human traffickers, child pornography rings, cults, terrorists and others.

"These are not your everyday social workers," said Emilio Mendoza, a supervisor of the DCFS' Multi-Agency Response Team.

They are on call 24/7, undergo training in tactical operations, and can quickly spot signs of abuse, neglect and danger to children.

"To this day, there's nothing like this in the country," Mendoza said.

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Group to target foster youths in sex trade

[Prostitution, from AA1] department statistics. The department has launched initiatives to address the issue of sex trafficking, including running prevention workshops in juvenile halls.

But underage sex workers may no longer fall under the Probation Department's jurisdiction.

Proposition 35, which imposes tougher penalties on pimps, also includes language that decriminalizes prostitution for minors caught up in the trade — although there is debate about the effects of that change. But officials fear that 'greater numbers of young people involved in prostitution will become the responsibility of the county Department of Children and Family Services. Depart-

ment Director Philip Browning said his agency is "really unprepared at this point" to handle such an influx.

Browning and others said the department is not empowered to keep children in group homes and other placements against their will, and can't prevent them from running away. Emilio I. Mendoza, a children services' program manager, said many young sex workers fear they will be punished by their pimps if they don't leave foster homes when they have an opportunity to do so.

"These kids see themselves as having no way out unless they're in a secure setting," he said.

Probation camps and juvenile halls provide that security. But advocates say the

criminal justice system is not the proper setting for young victims of abuse and coercion.

"They should not be treated as the criminal. They are a victim. The pimps should be treated as the criminal and given long prison sentences," said county Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, who proposed the task force.

Antonovich said during Tuesday's meeting that the trafficking issue came to the county board's attention early this year, when they learned that young girls were serving as prostitutes around Staples Center after Lakers games.

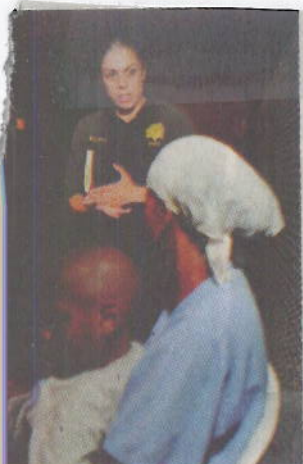
The task force includes county children's services, probation and mental health workers as well as law

enforcement officials. It will examine the scope of the foster youth prostitution problem and report back with recommendations in six months.

But Lois Lee, founder of a Los Angeles-based, 24-bed shelter for child sex workers called Children of the Night, said she is skeptical of the claim that kids in the foster system are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. The majority of the shelter's clients were under the legal guardianship of their parents when they arrived, according to the organization's 2011 annual report.

"They're kids that [the Department of Children and Family Services] left behind in the first place," Lee said.

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John McCoy Staff Photographer

Yvette Vega from the county's DCFS interviews a young mother as part of her role of watching out for children as a task force of more than 100 officers searches an area of Wilmington over the summer for sex offenders who may have parole violations.

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On this particular night, MART was part of a parole sweep of three city blocks listed as the addresses of about 60 registered sex offenders, who are barred by state law from living near schools and parks.

One of the men happened to have company during the raid. While parole agents questioned him, MART looked after his girlfriend and her sons.

This collaboration between law enforcement officers and social workers was forged in 2004.

"MART started out as a conversation with a sheriff's captain who handled child abuse cases and then was transferred over to gangs," said Flores-Holguin. "He asked them, 'What do you do with the kids?' And there was no answer."

"The reason we're successful is we're able to maintain integrity of law enforcement investigations," Mendoza added. "We don't compromise their undercover agents or informants and, in return, we ask that child safety never be compromised in order to maintain a case."

To date, MART has accompanied law enforcement agencies such as local police and sheriff's departments, as well as the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, Secret Service, Marshals Service, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, on about 8,000 operations.

They have rescued about 10,400 children encountered in raids and then handed them over to DCFS caseworkers.

Mendoza remembers a mother in Lakewood using her children as human shields to prevent law enforcement officers from searching their home. The father, a suspect in a crime, was hiding in a bathroom.

MART social workers persuaded the mother to let them take the children away. As the evacuation got under way, however, the father started shooting.

"The father opened fire on law enforcement, and they returned fire," Mendoza said. "This as our MART team is pulling the kids out the door."

MART social worker Yvette Vega recalled rescuing children from a father who participated in a drive-by shooting while they were in the backseat.

Then there was the father caught trying to escape through the backdoor of his house, leaving his toddler asleep in a room with black tar heroin and syringes all over the floor.

MART also took care of a 9-year-old boy who showed deputies where an adult had stashed three loaded guns in their home. One of the guns had been used in a murder.

They have found many instances of children being exposed to weapons and drugs.

Often, it is hidden in their cribs, closets and even milk bottles.

For parole administrator Joseph Martinez, who helped lead Operation Safe Haven, MART can be indispensable.

Even after decades on the job, Flores-Holguin is still shocked that parents would use their babies' cribs to store drugs and weapons, and teach their toddlers to flash gang signs.

"I don't know if I've seen the worst," she said. "It's a very scary thought."

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